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Date: Tue, 24 Oct 2000 23:15:04 -0700
To: amurray@mcb.harvard.edu
From: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>
Subject: When we run out of cobblestones, we'll throw carrots

Dear Andrew,

First of all, thanks very much for supporting this effort and for signing the letter. I think we are in complete agreement on the strategy for approaching the journals and publishers. I have already started quietly contacting people I know at Journals to start a dialog. I've had a number of discussions already with Ira Mellman, editor-in-chief of JCB, who is planning to take this proposal to the Rockefeller Press. Rich Roberts (editor-in-chief-for-life of NAR) has agreed to sign the letter and will be talking to the head of Oxford University Press to urge him to adopt the policy that we advocate in the letter. I'm going to try to talk to John Inglis (CSH press) this week. Harold Varmus has already exchanged emails about this with Don Kennedy and plans to talk with him tomorrow to strongly urge that Science take a leadership role. I was actually planning to email Philip Campbell this week to give him the "heads up", and ask if he would be interested in taking this proposal to the Nature publishers. (should I go ahead and do so, or do you think after your conversation I should hold off?). I hope they will not look narrowly at what they stand to sacrifice by giving up the pittance that they earn from > 6 month old material, but instead focus on what they might gain by taking some initiative and leadership in responding to what I think can be characterized as a strong and pervasive sentiment among responsible and thoughtful members of the scientific community (obviously this doesn't include me, but there are some of these among the signers of the letter). And they should also consider what Nature stands to lose if it deliberately rejects this request from the community - certainly it will lose some loyalty and respect (hard to put a price on this, but it will show up on the bottom line). And the very fact that many serious and good scientists will stand up and say that they can live without Nature is a blow to the stature of Nature, which is a "top journal" only because the scientific community makes it so. That's a more fragile asset than they may realize, and it would be a shame for them to recognize this only after they have lost precious prestige - maybe they want to be the JMB (remember JMB?) of the next decade. Currently Nature somehow manages to project an image of being a part of the scientific community and not just a money-making enterprise, in part because of the traditional loyalty of scientists who use it as a major nexus of communication. If this illusion is shattered, it will be hard to rebuild. Call me hard-hearted, but the fact that their profit margins are much lower than 40% doesn't bring any tears of sympathy to my eyes.

I have more confidence in the determination of scientists than you profess - most of us have spent years on projects that we believe in, despite discouraging advice, dismissive reviews from granting agencies and journals, etc. Once they recognize that this is an issue that should matter to them, for both practical and moral reasons, I think most good scientists will not back down. And I really don't believe that any journal is indispensable. In fact, I sincerely believe that if all the current journals were just to vanish, there would be only a very short lag before the scientific publication process were back in action, better than ever. As long as scientists who support this letter now don't wimp out at the first bluff from the journals ("The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"), the journals that decide to respond with a policy of confrontation will lose big.

As for the carrot-stick metaphor, I agree completely. I tried hard to make this letter appear as carrot-like as possible, and I think it really does have a nice, carrot-like quality if you look at it the right way. It promises to selectively REWARD the journals that adopt a specific policy that seems, (and really is) benign and minimally threatening to the journals' finances. It doesn't threaten to punish anyone (except implicitly - and after all, as you point out, knowing that there are sticks around here somewhere makes you appreciate the carrot even more).

I agree that if we can get Nature and Science to adopt the 6 months lease (as opposed to ownership) policy before this even goes public, they will not just save face, but get to play the white knight, and their leadership will help the supporters of the letter stand firm against the laggardly journals, and put moral and economic pressure on those journals to follow suit.

Anything initiative you want to take in talking to people at Science or Nature or any other journals with which you have good connections would be very helpful, I'm sure.

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I really appreciate the time you took to respond to my message and your willingness to support this grassroots effort.

I hope to see you at the victory celebration rather than the barricades, but either way, it will be fun.

Pat